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ABSTRACT

Movement is one of the primary ways in which the young child finds out about his world. Experiences in movement help the young child to develop a healthy sense of identity. Through movement, children: (1) learn, as infants, to distinguish themselves from the outside world; (2) find out what they can do and how they can affect their environment; (3) discover their own body parts and develop self-concept as they learn different ways to use them; (4) develop creativity by inventing new movement; (5) express emotions through movement and, possibly, learn that others feel the same emotions; and (6) learn to identify themselves with a group and, possibly, develop ethnic pride through movement experiences. Thus movement involved the physical, cognitive, affective and social developmental areas. (KM)

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EMERGING IDENTITY THROUGH MOVEMENT

Notes from a Workshop presentation at the NAEYC Convention
Atlanta, Georgia, November 15-16, 1972

Movement is one of the prime ways in which the young child finds out about his world. It is through movement that the infant learns to distinguish himself from things outside himself. Movement helps him to discover the size and shape of objects. And it is through movement that he develops the awareness of space that is now considered so essential in learning to read and write.

Psychologists have recognized the importance of kinesthetic sense in early learning. Gesell (1940) claimed that children at approximately the age of two are "decidedly motor-minded." Jersild (1962) said that there are "unexplored potentialities for learning" in the movements of young children. In recent years, the writing of the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, has strongly influenced our thinking about child development.

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Piaget (1963) called his first stage in the development of thinking in children the "sensorimotor period." During the first two years of life, the child must organize various sensations into internal "schema" or structures and must coordinate one sensory image with another to determine the nature of reality. Kinesthetic sense, that is, the communication between the muscles and tendons of the body with the brain, is one of the strongest receptors that the infant has. Through the sensation of his own movements, the infant begins to connect what he feels with what he sees, and hears. He gradually develops from a state where the world is undefined to one in which there is knowledge of self and of

outside objects.

Can you sense what the world is like for a newborn infant? We can try to simulate some of the experiences of the young child in finding out about himself through movement. First of all, let us discover our kinesthetic sense. Do you use it and rely on it?

Activity I.

Close your eyes, and try to become aware of the sensations in your muscles as you move your hands and arms. Now, with eyes closed, raise your arms in front of you so that they are parallel to the floor. Open your eyes and see how close you have come. Did you see where to place your arms? Did you touch anything? How did you know where your arms should go?

The nerve endings in your muscles relayed to the brain the amount of contraction in the muscles, the degree of rotation in the shoulder sockets, the position of the bones and tendons. From experience you know where your arms are in space.

This muscle sense has developed in the infant before birth. When he enters the world, it is the most organized sensory system that he has at his command. The neonate can control movement to find a comfortable position. In this area of perception he is ready for experience and can differentiate, to some extent, the various stimuli that reach his brain. He uses this kinesthetic sense to receive communication about his body in space and his relationship to the world around him.

We have all wondered about whether the neonate can see. We have been told that infants perceive only shadows or that they can pick up an image only if it is less than seven inches away. Recent scientific investigation (Fantz,1963) has established the fact that, at birth, a normal baby posseses organically complete visual equipment. Although he has vision, he does not

as yet make sense out of what he sees. Objects swim into view and recede. Shapes and colors are not clearly distinguished. The world is dreamlike and undefined. The baby now embarks on a major task of research. He must discover what visual sensations connect with what kinesthetic ones. He must discover, for example, that the hand which occasionally passes in front of his eyes is the same object that he introduces into his mouth. He must find that there are special feelings that accompany contacts between his own hands that are different from those he experiences when he takes his mother's finger.

Activity 2

Have you ever watched a four-month-old experimenting with his hands? Look at your hand as if you have never seen it before. What can it do? Move yourhand in front of your eyes, observing the shape it takes as you close and open your fingers. Close your eyes and try to concentrate on the sensation in your muscles as you perform these acts.

With eyes closed, grab the finger of one hand with the other hand. Concentrate upon the sensation. Now grab the finger of a partner. How does the changes in tactile sensation affect the image you receive?

It is through these means that the infant learns to tell his own body from that of others. The baby is developing trust in his own body mechanisms to bring him information about the world. He is gaining in ability to control his own environment, and is thus beginning to sense his own identity.

Movement exploration continues to be important to developing self concept throughout early childhood. Have you ever watched a toddler the first time he walks alone? Or have you seen the expression of the face of a three year-old the first time he made it to the top of the jungle gym? The feelings of accomplishment that accompany explorations in movement have a great deal to do with the child's idea about himself.

We frequently hear him say, "Look what I can do!" He comes to know what "I" stands for by experiencing what that "I" can do with his own body. Desire to achieve in this area seems to dominate all other urges at the two and three year old level.

Psychologists have begun to recognize that movement is a motivation in its own right, independent of other drives. In his paper on "Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence," White (1959) reports on various studies of motility. Animal studies reveal that running in an activity wheel is sufficient reward for learning. Children are gratified when they discover the connection between a movement executed and the accompanying and subsequent sensations. Such experiences build up a "definite self-or body-consciousness which becomes the center and the point of reference for all purposeful and coordinated activity." Growth of egó, therefore, depends heavily upon the consequences of movement exploration.

The psychoanalyst, Bela Mittelmann (1954) draws even more radical conclusions in his paper on motility. Not only is motility considered to be an "urge in its own right," but at the second and third years, it "dominates all other urges." The child's ability to handle his own body-movement is closely related to his ego-development. Affective movements are his main means of communication with adults. Deprivation of opportunity for motility is seen by Mittelmann as a cause for pathological behavior.

Studies of institutional babies have shown that when they are deprived of motility they suffer a loss in developmental areas of language and reasoning ability. These deprivation studies have been cited as evidence of the effects of environment upon intelligence (Hunt, 1961).

Parents and nursery school teachers have encouraged communication with

young children through games and finger plays such as "pat-a-cake," and "this-little-pig-went-to-market." Without realizing the developmental value of those activities, parents through the ages have made use of movement as a first means for establishing ties of communication with infants. In all cultures babies can be observed being rocked or bounced, and reacting to this stimulation by adults with glee.

Gordon (1969) feels that it is the deprivation of this early stimulation in some poverty homes that has caused the lag in learning prevalent among disadvantaged children. He set up a project to investigate a way in which early intervention into the lives of babies might break the poverty cycle. Woman from disadvantaged areas were trained to teach mothers how to stimulate their infants. The stimulation procedure consisted of a series of games designed to increase perceptual and motor abilities. Many of these games involved the babies in movement exploration. The infants were to crawl after hidden objects, to play "peek-a-boo" or to make arm and hand movements in time to the rhythm of a nursery tune. The program was effective in improving abilities of babies, especially those between one and two years of age.

If we were to examine the basic movement patterns of the young child, we might easily find ways to extend and increase their learning capacities through kinesthetic stimulation. We will try to identify the types of movements the child between two and four most frequently uses. If we try to do them ourselves, we might experience some of the joy and satisfaction that young children seem to derive from movement. Can you discover what your body can do in a way similar to the way that the young child explores and experiments with his body?

Rocking is, of course, a favorite activity at this age. Possibly because it is reminiscent of earlier infant comfort or simply because the physical

movement is enjoyable, toddlers love to be rocked by adults or to use rocking toys themselves. They love to ride a rocking horse, and, once they get used to it, they propel themselves quite vigorously sometimes. Swinging is closely related to rocking, and children can be observed swinging arms and legs whenever they are not occupied with something else.

Activity 3

We might ask, "How many ways can you swing your arms?" They can go from side to side, or they can go up and down. Perhaps you can find another way by making your arms circle around your body. If you do this more vigorously, it may make you want to swing around in a pivot. In time to some waltz-type music or the beat of a drum, adults as well as children will enjoy finding the many ways in which they can swing arms, legs or torso in time to a rhythmic beat.

When children are encouraged to explore new ways to do familiar movements, they are stimulated to come up with their own creative responses. The movement they create is their own, and they feel the satisfaction of "doing their own thing." Stretching and bending can be done in many different ways. Children are constantly exploring ways to stretch as they learn to climb, to reach and to jump. All the joints of our body extend and bend again as we walk, play games or do basic work movements.

Activity 4

We can begin with closing our hands into a fist, and then stretching the fingers out again as far as they will go. This same movement can then be extended to the whole arm--and then to the whole body. Fold in as tight as you can get, with every joint bent and every muscle contracted. Now stretch out slowly, letting each part of your body unfold until you are totally stretched out.

Now can you find another position when you close in, bending all of your joints and folding in tight together? Then open up in a new way. This can be done slowly, opening a little bit at a time, or it can be done suddenly, with all parts of the body extending out at the same time. Try doing closing and opening movements in different positions, in different directions and in different tempos.

When challenged to move in this way, children will come up with many movement combinations, some of which are more difficult and involved than we

are capable of teaching them to do. They freely experiment with what their bodies can do, and are proud of their accomplishments. Sometimes children whose language has not developed sufficiently for them to express their own ideas find that this exploration in movement provides their first opportunity for recognition. A four-year-old in a head start class met me in the hallway of his school three weeks after I had given a demonstration in which he had participated. He stopped me and said, "Look! I found a new way to do it!" He extended arms and legs in a unique position and grinned at me exhuberantly. This was a child who rarely participated in class discussions.

Bouncing movements are another common characteristic behavior of young children. Any excitement is likely to cause a bouncing or jogging type of action. Infants have been observed bouncing up and down in their carriages in time to the rhythm of the washing machine. Two-and three-year olds jog along whenever they are happy, and are frequently observed dancing in time to some music on radio or television.

> Activity 5
> Play some highly rhythmic music (percussion or rock music is fine) on a phonograph. Experiment with bouncing in time to the music in a seated position, bounce your shoulders, your head, your elbows and so on. Then bounce on your seat, letting your body move freely in time to the music. Now stand up and continue bouncing as you move about. Your locomotor activity will greatly resemble the action of toddlers as they jog along gleefully. Do you feel the enjoyment of rhythmic activity that toddlers do?

An activity such as this can help the young child to identify different parts of his body. Knowing this, and sensing his own ability to control those body parts, helps the child to develop a sense of body image and contributes to his developing self-concept.

Movement is a way for the young child to experience feelings and to identify them. Children are quick to respond to different qualities in music, and they will move with slow, sustained patterns to calm and peaceful music and in strong and vigorous ways to sharp, percussive music.

Activity 6

Try moving to different types of music, and see it you can identify the feelings evoked as you move. Music may be slow and smooth, sharp and fast, slow and strong or fast and lively. What feelings did your movement give you?

Children need experiences of this nature to help them to understand themselves and others. Too often feelings are not recognized or discussed. Children do not realize that others have feelings similar to theirs. They are not used to talking about feelings. During an investigation of children's aesthetic responses, I asked some seven-year-olds how a movement made them feel. Many responded with "I feel fine," taking the question as an inquiry about their health.

Although they do not frequently discuss their feelings, young children express them freely in the ways that they move. We know the two-year-old is happy when he gallops along the street. We sense the timidity of the three-year -old and he walks with head down and feet shuffling on his first day at school. We know the four-year-old is angry as he kicks the dirt vigorously on the playground. Parents and teachers would do well to study the movement patterns of young children. They identify the child and his feelings better than any other source of information.

Children not only learn about their own identity through movement; movement sometimes helps them to identify themselves with their own social or ethnic group. A UNICEF film called "All of the World's Children" shows how three children, from Paraguay, from Kenya and from Ceylon each learned to identify with his own culture. Movement was an essential component. In Ceylon, for example, the young child participated in a street festival that had all of the excitement of a circus, but was meaningful in terms of his people's beliefs and traditions. Total physical involvement gave each of these three children a knowledge of WHO HE IS and what group he belongs to.

He developed a sense of pride and identity.

Activity 7

Play ethnic music of various kinds and try to move in time to it. What qualities of movement does the music evoke? Without learning any basic steps, see what kinds of movements you do. Irish music will stimulate a hopping action, similar to a jig. African ~~song~~ drum music will evoke sharp body contractions; Hawiian music will initiate waving, undulating motions.

I have tried this activity with nursery age children without telling them anything about the music I was going to play for them. It is amazing how they responded with movements that were so closely associated with the culture from which the music came! Surely they had not enough experience to know the dance patterns associated with each kind of ethnic music. Even the strange sounding Kabuki music of Japan evoked movement patterns from the children that resembles Oriental dance.

We must give children opportunity to develop healthy self-identity, both as individuals and as members of a group. Music and movement can help children to have pride in who and what they are. As they gain in self-esteem, they may become more fluent in language. A little girl in a head start class in Mississippi was the only member of the group to respond verbally to a visiting teacher. As the children performed a "follow-the-leader" type of game to the synchopated beat of "It's a mighty pretty motion," the child announced, "I know a song that goes like that." She proceeded to sing a song she had learned while attending church with her mother. While "Give me more power, Lord" has little relationship to the words in the song of the circle game, the tune had a familiar beat to which this child responded. After she led the group in a round of her church song, they all began to talk more freely with each other and with the teacher.

Experiences in movement help the young child to develop a healthy sense

of identity. Through movement, children find out about themselves.

> They learn, as infants, to tell themselves from the outside world.
>
> They find out what they can do and how they can affect their environment.
>
> They discover their own body parts and develop self-concept as they learn different ways to use them.
>
> They develop creativity by inventing new movements.
>
> They express feelings through movement, and may learn to identify them.
>
> They learn to identify themselves with a group and may develop ethnic pride through movement experiences.

Thus, the range of developmental areas, the physical, the mental, the emotional and the social are involved in the emergence of identity in the child. Movement experiences are an important part of the process.

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